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WITHIN WE ARE ALL ALIKE - BUT DO WE REALIZE IT?

by Jon Tenfjord

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For nearly a generation teachers with international understanding as an ideal have taught Norwegian schoolchildren to sing Much is different, but that is only outward. They have explained, shown films and read out loud about children from other cultures. Yet as soon as the same young Norwegians actually meet children of the same age, but with a different background, in an everyday situation, insults and mobbing start with a bang and in such a way that viewers and listeners with the same standard of values as the teachers sit speechless in front of their radios and TV-sets whilst Norwegian schoolchildren express themselves about their new countrymen. Has nothing been of use?

A newspaper wrote recently that it is not true that "within we are all alike". We have been lulled by some sort of faith in this supposition but actually we are very different and now - having nearly 80,000 foreign workers in the country - we experience the fundamental differences as a kind of painful awakening.

Nevertheless, I wish to defend my old song. Within we are alike, we have the same needs and the same feelings, but they manifest themselves differently depending upon what is "outward". It may be difficult to see through all this and discover the core of basic human likeness.

No doubt many of the attitudes taken up by young "mobbers" and "abusers" are influenced by the parent generation, the generation that taught them to sing Some children are brown, Little negro doll and other edifying songs, the generation that met with the "right" books and the UN ideals in the school library and in classrooms. I think the best thing we can do now is some serious soul-searching. How do discriminating attitudes come into existence?

Personally I would guess that they arise most frequently among people who feel, consciously or unconsciously, left out or discriminated against, those who feel threatened with regard to satisfactory acceptance, those who are afraid of losing, or think they lack, social benefits and privileges such as suitable work and housing. But these are not the only reasons for discrimination. What we call "herd mentality" comes into the picture and is of great importance in connection with the mobbing that takes place in the school yard. Certain attitudes are "in" among schoolmates, and it takes a strong personality to risk alienation from the group and to maintain attitudes which officially are contrary to those of the group.

Let us not exaggerate Norwegian racism

It does exist and is convincingly demonstrated at certain schools and in other environments. But it does not manifest itself in the same way everywhere. For research purposes we need to know why it manifests itself more distinctly in some places than in others.

There are such great dangers involved in this problem that we have to be alert. What can we do? The old truth that deeds count more than words also holds good here. The popular teacher showing his attitudes and standard of values can do more than all the books put together. He or she has the possibility to create an environment where everybody is accepted on his own merits. However, if the outside influences are strong, it may be difficult to make it work. And what about the influence from within - from forces in our own mind? How much do we really accept in our desire to understand?

As a small contribution towards rectifying the present situation, Bokklubbens barn (Book Club, division for children) published Carol Barker's book Far away from here long ago because, in the form of a picture book, it tells something about the history and culture of Islam. In this book children meet with religious concepts from West Africa about the year 1500, while Christian

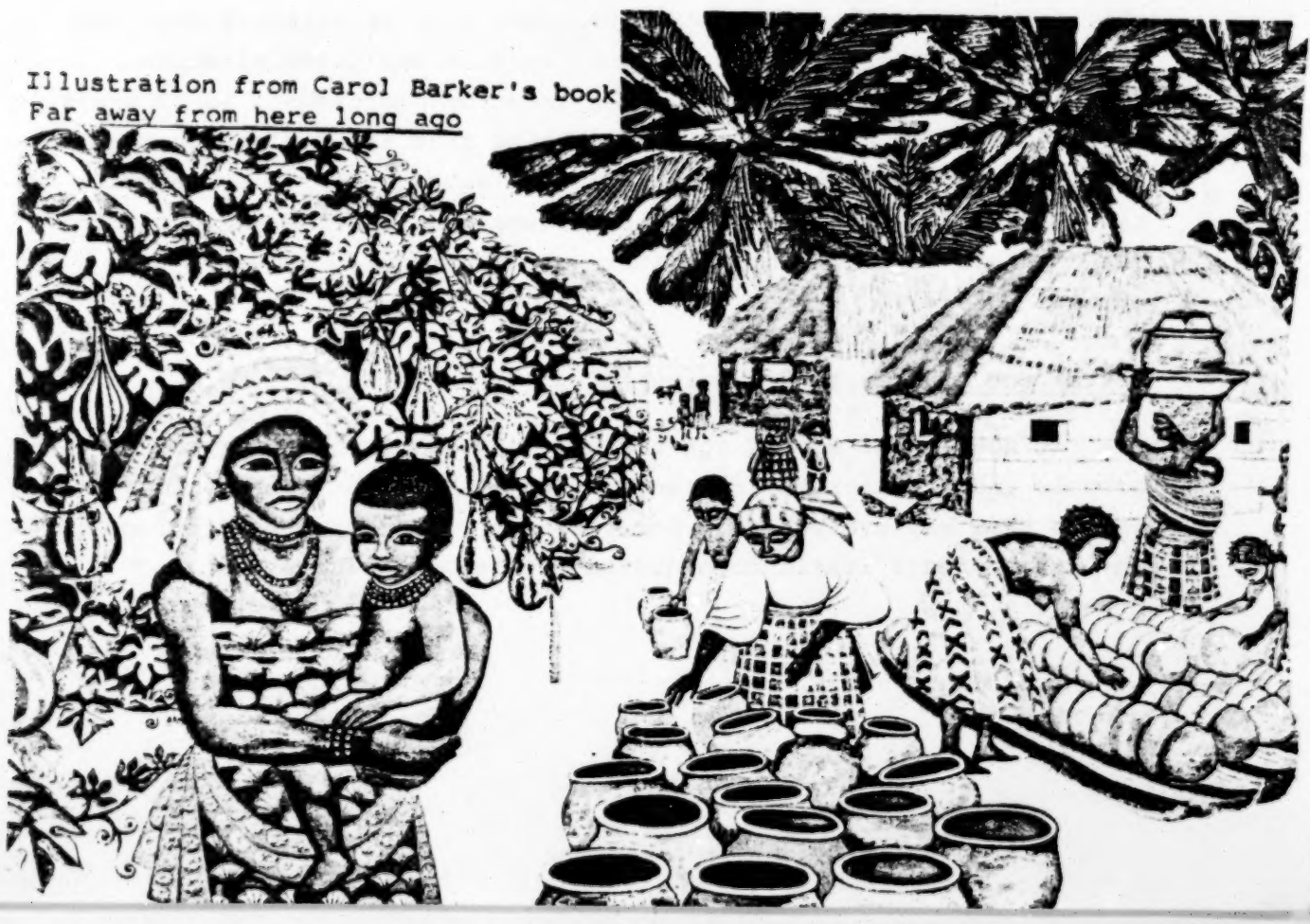

Illustration from Carol Barker's book Far away from here long ago

missionaries are depicted as seen with the eyes of the native population. Bokklubben received from its members encouragingly few, but rather strong negative reactions, ranging from remarks like: "Heathens and women of the harem are not suitable for Norwegian children" to a calm, but convinced statement that children of 5 to 9 years should not be exposed to meeting with a foreign religion. During a television programme in December a female worker in a restaurant called to tell about the discrimination to which she had been exposed by her colleagues who were foreign workers. It is something quite new to us Norwegians, having a uniform culture and a strong traditional discrimination against certain groups (Lapps, gypsies, "tramps") to live with and, to some extent, accept values contradictory our own. How shall we achieve it?

In today's world it is essential

I wish more children could experience what a small group of 30 - 40 Norwegian children experience every year when they participate in one of the camps organized by the Children's International Summer Villages in many different countries. Here they meet children of their own age, but with a different language and a foreign culture and join them in activities which are organised to make them realize the differences and at the same time get to know each other well.

Twenty-five years of experience have resulted in an arrangement which has proved to be a kind of vaccine against prejudices with regard to national, social or cultural differences. It is however, a rather expensive vaccine, and at present not many can be immunised. One of my private dreams is that something of that kind be obligatory in the Norwegian school in future.

What can we do here and now, within the limits of our present possibilities? At any rate, we shall not stop singing suitable

songs, reading suitable books and showing suitable films. The best teacher's aid besides his own personality, is the book because it is so easily accessible and can always be at hand at the right moment. The point is to find the right books and to use them properly. Literature is important because it creates identification. The "mobbers" may experience what it feels like to be mobbed when they read Aase Foss Abrahamsen's Peter tankefull (Peter Pensive). They may have a better understanding of the situation of the children of foreign workers after reading Sverre Asmervik's Og så kom vi til Norge (And then we came to Norway) or Aimée Sommerfelt's Den farlige natten (The dangerous night).

However sometimes the toil connected with reading obstructs the objectives, especially in the case of those who come off as losers in the art of reading, and they will therefore be strongly tempted to "take it out of" someone else. This makes reading out loud very important. Then the pupils are relieved of the work connected with the technique of reading so that imagination, feelings and thoughts may work on the material - this is what we call "active reading". During the discussions in the class the pupils have the possibility to talk in the third person about their own experience of and reactions to the problems and topics dealt with in the book. For children who are modest and shy this will be beneficial already in the infant school. On the upper level it will be important to most of the pupils.

The teacher should not fuss over the material by asking too many unimportant questions. A careful question may, however, bring forth a train of thought, giving new understanding of essential points in the story. In the same way the pupils' questions may help the teacher. Drawings in the infant school and reports of actions on the higher levels may also give the teacher an indication of what the pupils found important in the book and what they understand of it. When choosing books to be read out loud it may be useful to remember that you act best as an intermediary of the material that interests you.

Abstract topics like ideals and thoughts behind the activity of the United Nations may turn to concrete reality for a class if it dramatizes a simple little picture book like Johanne Oppenheim's På den andre siden av elva (On the other side of the river).

Illustration from Johanne Oppenheim's
På den andre siden av elva (On the other side of the river)

An important part of cultural differences is represented by religious conceptions, but to give children an idea of this variety is not always easy. In my own book Regnbuebroen (The rainbow bridge), I try to explain to children what religious myths are and to concretize them by retelling myths of creation from various parts of the world.

Symbols stir many children, a fact you can see when they draw. This activity is suitable for most pupils in the infant school, whereas dramatics may help older children to "get closer to" the material.

"Understanding" is not a concept to be brought forward on the occasion of UN-Day or a meeting of parents where dramas are performed. It must pervade every working day in the school, in the first place among the pupils themselves, but also between the pupils and the teacher in the classroom. We need impulses every day to support this. It may also be useful to look from this point of view at the topics we take up for discussion.

Not every pupil depends upon a book being read out loud to understand its contents. Pictures may often be very instructive for those who have difficulty in reading. When a topic is taken up for close consideration, it may be useful to have a small extra library of books and booklets of varying degrees of difficulty in the classroom. Lists of topics may help both teachers and pupils to find the material they need and may be interested in at certain times.

The Human Family - books for world citizens

There is a correlation between human and international understanding in connection with every subject. The Norwegian Committee for UNICEF and Statens bibliotektilsyn (The Governmental Library Inspection) in 1972 published a list of books Familien menneske, bøker for verdensborgere (The human family - books for world citizens), referring to books published during the past five years (1968-1972) which in the first place were connected with certain subjects and in the second place had the correlation mentioned above. Now the Norwegian Committee for UNICEF will publish a new list, this time comprising books published in the period 1972-1977 which should be easily obtained through the Central Library or the nearest bookstore.

The list is intended as a support for teachers in their work as regards the aim of the model curriculum: that pupils shall learn to regard themselves and their own society as being part of the world and to understand the extent of their own responsibility.

Great importance has been attached to the teaching of international understanding by means of literature. The list deals with various subjects, giving concrete examples in accordance with the different grades.

Many of the books show that "within" we are quite alike - even if different conditions and environments make us appear outwardly different.

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